



# Foster Care to 21: Doing it Right

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YOUTH

OPPORTUNITIES  
INITIATIVE

## Foster Care to 21: Doing It Right

The federal Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 provides support to states to extend foster care to age 21 for certain young people. If foster care is extended to age 21 in a developmentally appropriate way, it can help put young people on a trajectory toward success. However, if that extension is merely a continuation of existing practices that emphasize only independent living services, services will not be effective for young adults, nor will young adults want to take advantage of the benefits that extended foster care can offer.

### Critical questions

What constitutes “extended foster care”? Why is it important for young people to remain in foster care beyond age 18? How should we design foster care to 21 to most effectively meet the needs of young adults in care? This issue brief examines these questions and provides guidance on how to provide foster care to 21 the “right way.”

## Defining extended foster care

Many states report that they already provide “foster care to 21” because they provide independent living services past age 18. This issue brief defines extended foster care, or foster care to 21, comprehensively—as a continuation of all components of foster care that young people experience prior to reaching the age of 18: independent living services, foster care room and board, case and permanency planning, and judicial oversight. Research, the experiences of child welfare professionals, and the voices of young people in foster care themselves make clear that each of these components is critical to achieving positive outcomes as young people transition from the foster care system.

## Poor outcomes for young people aging out at 18

Young people who age out of foster care face significant challenges as they attempt to make the transition to adulthood on their own. Researchers conducting the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult

“How would you feel if I were to map out your life without knowing exactly what it was you were looking for?”

—Josh Wolfe, 18

Functioning of Former Foster Youth found that most young people who had aged out of foster care were faring poorly compared to other young people in the general population (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup> Homelessness and precarious housing situations are particularly troubling outcomes for these young people.<sup>2</sup> The Midwest Evaluation found that by age 23 or 24, 40 percent of young people had been homeless or without a stable living situation at least once since exiting foster care and that many had been homeless multiple times.

TABLE 1. OUTCOMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE FORMERLY IN FOSTER CARE COMPARED TO GENERAL POPULATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

OUTCOME	FOSTER CARE	GENERAL
No high school diploma or GED	24.4%	7.3%
Not employed	52%	24.5%
Average income from employment	\$12,064	\$20,349
Have health insurance	57%	78%
Males who have been arrested	81.2%	17.4%
Females who have been pregnant	77%	40.4%

Source: Courtney, et al. (2010)

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1 Courtney, et al., 2010.  
2 Brandford & English, 2004; Fowler, et al., 2006.

## Better outcomes for young people who remain in care until 21

According to the Midwest Evaluation, young people who remained in care to age 21 fared far better than those who had to leave care at 18.

- Those required to leave care at age 18 were 2.7 times more likely to have been homeless<sup>3</sup>;
- Remaining in care more than doubled the odds that young people would be working or in school at age 19<sup>4</sup>;
- Those remaining in care were twice as likely to have completed at least one year of college by age 21<sup>5</sup>;
- Young women remaining in care experienced a 38% reduction in the incidence of pregnancy before age 20<sup>6</sup>;
- Those remaining in care were more likely to access independent living services.<sup>7</sup>

## Cost benefits

Extending foster care to 21 can yield substantial financial benefits for young people transitioning from foster care and for society. Allowing young people to remain in care until age 21 doubles the percentage who earn a college degree from 10.2 to 20.4,<sup>8</sup> thereby increasing their earnings potential. Researchers project that a young person formerly in foster care can expect to earn \$481,000 more over his or her work life with a college degree than with only a high school diploma; attending some college

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3 Dworsky & Courtney, 2010.  
4 Courtney, 2005.  
5 Peters, et al., 2009.  
6 Courtney, et al., 2005.  
7 Courtney, et al., 2005.  
8 Dworsky, 2009.

but not completing a degree adds \$129,000.<sup>9</sup> A cost-benefit analysis conducted in California found that increasing attainment of a bachelor's degree would return \$2.40 for each dollar spent on extended foster care.<sup>10</sup>

Extended foster care also lowers societal costs related to early childbearing, because young women who remain in care are more likely to delay parenting.<sup>11</sup> Research indicates that:

- Teen mothers are 2.2 times more likely to have a child placed in foster care than those who delay child bearing until age 20 or 21<sup>12</sup>;
- Young mothers are twice as likely as older mothers to have a reported case of child abuse or neglect<sup>13</sup>;
- The costs associated with teen pregnancy in the United States were estimated at \$9.1 billion in 2004. This figure represents a combination of increased public health care, child welfare, and prison system costs as well as decreased tax revenue from the lower earning potential found in children of teen mothers).<sup>14</sup>

## The new federal law and federal support

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (FCA) allows states to continue providing foster care payments on behalf of young people up to age 19, 20, or 21 with federal support if the young person is:

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9 Dworsky, 2009.

10 Courtney et al., 2009.

11 Courtney, et al., 2010.

12 National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2006.

13 Love, et al., 2005.

14 National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2006.

“I went into foster care at 12. I was very used to things being structured. When I got out at 18 I was very scared because I didn’t have many people I could count on, and it was scary going out into the world for the first time by yourself.”

—Brittany Reid, age 23

- completing his or her secondary education or a program leading to an equivalent credential;
- enrolled in an institution that provides post-secondary or vocational education;
- participating in a program or activity designed to promote or remove barriers to employment;
- employed for at least 80 hours per month; or
- incapable of doing any of the above due to a medical condition.

### ABOUT JIM CASEY YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES INITIATIVE

The Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative’s mission is to ensure that the young people who leave foster care are able to make successful transitions to adulthood. In an effort to improve the systems that support them, the Initiative promotes the strategies of: youth voice, community partnerships, research and evaluation, public will and policy, and the creation of a range of opportunities for young people. It works in partnership with communities and states across the country to integrate these strategies into the core work of state child welfare agencies and other strategic allies.

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“To make foster youth want to stay in care, you would have to devise a way to make them realize that support while in extended care is better than being out in reality alone without the support. Maybe allow them to experience the ‘real world’ alone and allow for them to come back for services as long as they are still between 18 and 21, creating an open door policy.”

—Nicole Byers, age 21

States have the latitude to define each of these conditions, and the federal government encourages them to do so in such a way as to ensure “ample supports” for the “broadest population [of older youth] possible consistent with the law.”<sup>15</sup> Each state sets its own verification processes to assess whether a young person meets one of the conditions. The FCA also allows each state to set its own policies for allowing young people to re-enter foster care between the ages of 18 and 21.

## Quality counts

While the extension of foster care to 21 is an important step in supporting young people, it is the quality of foster care that matters. Young people will make the decision to remain in foster care beyond age 18 only if the services, placement settings, and judicial oversight offered to them meet their needs as emerging adults. In today’s complex world, young people in foster care face more challenges entering adulthood than earlier generations, and more than their peers who have not been in foster care. Even among well-supported populations, young people need more time and supports to successfully enter adulthood than previous generations. Young people

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15 US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010, p. 4.

who have experienced foster care and have lacked support from parents and community need even more time and supports. Quality extended foster care provides young adults with family supports, education and training opportunities, employment as a link to career paths, social and civic engagement or opportunities to contribute to their community, adequate health and mental health supports, and a web of supportive relationships that give meaning to life.<sup>16</sup>

## What does extended care look like?

Foster care to 21 must be:

- **Developmentally appropriate.** Foster care to 21 must be based on the developmental needs of adolescents and young adults, which are different than those of younger children, and it must respond to the developmental impact of trauma and loss. Extended foster care must recognize that young people in care are gradually transitioning to adulthood as they move toward greater independence—in the areas of residence, employment, education, finances, romance, and possibly parenting—even as they are developing vital interdependent relationships. These relationships with family (including siblings), a network of other caring adults, and peers are the subject of another issue brief, *Social Capital: Building Quality Networks for Young People in Foster Care*.<sup>17</sup>
- **Geared toward permanency.** Given the increasing urgency of connecting young people in extended foster care with permanent families and committed caring adults, child welfare

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16 Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley, & Burton, 2009.

17 Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2011, available at [www.jimcaseyyouth.org](http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org)

agencies must give priority to permanency planning. Foster care to 21 that does not respond to this urgency will merely postpone young people's exit from foster care to a disconnected young adulthood.

- **Client-directed.** Young people's attorneys must zealously represent their clients, advocating for what young people state that they need. Legal representation must be youth-driven, responsive, and respectful of the unique needs of each young person.
- **Informed by brain development research.** Brain development during adolescence creates immense developmental potential and parallels that of early childhood. Because older youth and young adults in foster care are primed to develop strengths that will benefit them throughout their lives, foster care to age 21 must take a *positive youth development* approach in all service delivery: young people must be connected with caring relationships, adults must set high expectations and communicate them clearly to youth, young people must be allowed to make their own decisions and learn from their mistakes, and young people must have meaningful opportunities to lead and contribute to others and to their communities.

## Who is responsible for what?

Currently, extended foster care programs place much of the accountability and responsibility for maintaining extended support agreements on the young person. At age 17, they have little control over decisions impacting their lives and are treated as children. Suddenly, at age 18, they are treated as fully capable adults who must fulfill adult responsibilities and expectations. Without strong preparation for this new role, young people frequently fall short of

“Staying in foster care is the last thing that youth in care who have had a bad experience want to hear.  
What if we package this different?”

—Sixto Cancel, age 19

expectations and lose the very support that is critical to successful transitions to adulthood.

In order for extended foster care systems to support young people in healthy development and connect them to family, housing, employment, health care, and education, all parties involved in these systems must have clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

## Young person

- Actively engage in planning for permanence and the transition to adulthood;
- Communicate at least once per month with the adult supporter from the child welfare agency;
- Uphold conditions allowing access to the extended foster care system by, for example, attending school or working—or notifying the adult supporter/team if something is preventing this;
- Attend and participate in judicial reviews.

## Child welfare caseworker

- Involve young people as partners in all aspects of planning and decisionmaking, recognizing them as experts on their lives and giving deference to their voice throughout the process;
- Continue permanency planning that is youth-directed; support young people in building vital social capital; and, when appropriate, address the possibility of reconnecting the young person with his or her birth family in a way that is safe and supportive;

“Court reviews have been helpful to me because this is the one time I think about all the things I need and demand the services. I have gone to court to ask the judge for a placement change and the lawyer has advocated for things that I needed.”

—Sixto Cancel, age 19

- Fully engage young people in choosing healthy and supported living options for themselves, including continued placement in a family-based setting and living on their own;
- Conduct case management and regular visits in a way that is developmentally appropriate and tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of each young person;
- Assist young people in pursuing education and employment, accessing physical and mental health care, and securing safe and stable housing;
- Collect data on the experiences of young people ages 18 to 21 in foster care, with an emphasis on capturing the voices of youth.

## Judicial System

- Provide judicial oversight in a manner that is collaborative and supportive of young people taking the lead in their lives and actively participating in hearings;
- Oversee the child welfare agency’s continuing efforts to ensure that young people leave care to join a family;
- Oversee the child welfare agency’s provision of the range of services and supports that young people need to begin the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

## Young Person’s Legal Representative

- Attend judicial reviews and ensure that the child welfare agency is held accountable to its responsibilities under the extended care agreement;
- Provide client-directed representation by zealously representing the young person’s stated desires and goals;
- Support the young person in adhering to his or her responsibilities under the extended care agreement;
- Notify young people of the times of court proceedings, support their attendance, prepare them to participate, and debrief with them regarding outcomes after each court proceeding;
- Support meaningful youth participation in court proceedings.

## Success through programs, policy, training, and support

*Programmatically*, states can develop services to be delivered and define outcomes to be achieved that are specific to youth and young adults in foster care, as opposed to younger children. They can convene groups of 18-to-21-year-olds to inform the creation of programs impacting that age group. For example, young people in foster care can inform the design of training for resource parents who will care for older youth, or the development of outcomes specific to people ages 18 to 21.

States can develop and implement *policies* that promote quality foster care to 21 by:

- implementing the federal option to extend foster care to age 21;
- broadly defining the conditions for young people to remain in foster care until age 21 and allowing young people to re-enter care if they decide they need to;



- incorporating the services and outcomes that pertain to young people in foster care to age 21 in regulations, judicial codes, and policy; and
- broadly defining the “supervised setting” where young people may independently live while in extended foster care.

States can support quality foster care to 21 by developing and implementing *training and supports* that:

- identify staff and foster parents who want to and have the qualities to work effectively with young people ages 18 to 21 in foster care;
- inform the judiciary about the developmental needs of older youth in foster care and developmentally appropriate approaches to working with them;
- inform caseworkers and young people about services available to transitioning young people and the role that each party will play if the young person chooses to remain in care;
- train adults working with 18-to-21-year-olds to help them recognize and address their attitudes toward oppositional young people and common misperceptions of extended care as a dependence-creating system that reinforces negative behavior.

Child welfare staff, foster care providers, members of the legal community, and others who work with young people need to understand and value developmentally appropriate services for young people, emerging adulthood as a transition time, adolescent brain development and the possibilities it presents for healing, the social capital that is critical for young people, and the importance of a positive youth development approach. When that occurs, these providers will be well equipped to “do foster care to 21 right” by designing, implementing, and evaluating policies and practices effectively.

“We need a safe program/environment where youth are challenged to step up and take their future into their hands, but also with the assurance that there will be adults cheering them on and making themselves available to help when needed.”

—Eddye Vanderkwaak, age 20

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## Related Publications

This issue brief draws from a research base and set of recommendations described more fully in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunity Initiative's publication *The Adolescent Brain: New Research and Its Implications for Young People Transitioning From Foster Care*. Also part of the series is the issue brief *Social Capital: Building Quality Networks for Young People in Foster Care*. For copies of these and other resources, visit the Initiative's web site at [www.jimcaseyyouth.org](http://www.jimcaseyyouth.org).

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